

Climate change in the Security Council

On the road to qualifying climate change as ‘threat multiplier’

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Wildfires are heating the Earth from the Arctic to the Amazon, islands are drowning, and the record for the hottest year has been [broken every year since 2015](#). No one would doubt that climate change causes these events. Despite [people from all continents protesting in the streets](#) to urge decision-makers to eventually take action to help combat climate change, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has not taken any binding measures yet. However, in January 2019, States in the Security Council [have given a name](#) to the phenomenon: *threat multiplier*. But how does this qualification fit into Art. 39 UN Charter?

The main fora for environmental matters are the UN General Assembly, the International Panel for Climate Change and the UN Framework Convention Climate Change. These organs do not have the power to impose coercive measures on states, unlike the UNSC. The UNSC, however, can only take actions under chapter VII of the UN Charter if Art. 39 is fulfilled. The situation in question at least has to be qualified as a *threat to peace*.

By qualifying climate change as a *threat multiplier*, is the UNSC breaking free from Art. 39 UN Charter's categories? Or is this qualification opening the door for the UNSC to address climate change at least indirectly? How did States arrive at this qualification?

Relationship status: it's complicated

When adopting the UN Charter in 1945, States were far from envisaging that one day the question of whether issues not directly involving the use of force, such as climate change, could be qualified as threats to the peace. It is well-known that the meaning of threat to peace has evolved over time. It also include environmental issues: In the 1990s, the UNSC was ready to [recognise](#) that ‘the non-military sources of instability in the economic, social, humanitarian and ecological fields have become threats to peace and security’ and, on this basis, steadily broadened its mandate. For instance, the UNSC already [held Iraq responsible](#) for the environmental damages caused during its invasion, and occupation, of Kuwait.

Climate change *per se* was only brought to the UNSC's attention in 2007, when the [first debate](#) entirely devoted to it was held. The starting point for this debate was the following: Is the UNSC an appropriate forum to discuss climate change? This was a legitimate question to be raised as, for example, the Kyoto Protocol was not envisaging any role for the UNSC with regard to climate change. Nonetheless, the issue had been acknowledged by several participants to the 2007 debate

as presenting a serious global challenge. Moreover, representatives of the UK, Congo, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Papua New-Guinea even went further by asking the UNSC to take responsibility to address climate change, as it presents a *potential* threat to peace through the effects it engenders. To do so, they relied on the [UK's letter](#) to the UNSC which claimed that phenomena such as border disputes, migration, and humanitarian crisis would be even more triggered by climate change.

The UNSC did not adopt a resolution. However, that debate was a starting point for a broader discussion on the phenomenon in the UNSC.

Under the agenda item 'Maintenance of international peace and security', the UNSC addressed climate change in a [second meeting](#) in 2011. In this meeting, the impact of climate change on international peace and security was considered picking up the debates from 2007. Again, UNSC members reaffirmed the serious global challenges caused by climate change. However, two opposing views emerged, preventing further action. Western States, including the US, and small islands developing states maintained that the threat multiplier qualification of climate change was a sufficient basis for the UNSC to act. China and Russia disagreed. In fact, qualifying climate change as a threat to the peace was, in their view, neither 'right' nor beneficial. For them, the Security Council was not the right place to consider these questions, lacking expertise and necessary means and resources.

Nonetheless, the UNSC issued a [presidential statement](#). It reflected the different views on the UNSC's mandate to deal with climate change. But it did not shut the door to play a role in addressing climate change: it emphasized the possible implications on international peace and security climate change may have.

[Resolution 2349](#) adopted by the UNSC in 2017 concretized this statement in the light of the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin. It recognized the "adverse effects of climate change among other factors on the stability of the region". And it emphasised "the need for adequate risk assessment and risk management strategies, by governments and the UN relating to these factors" – thus arguably also referring to the UNSC. The resolution only concerned a specific conflict in a specific area. But it indicated that the UNSC strived to increase its room for manoeuvre in this area.

Climate change as "threat multiplier" – A step forward or backward?

The meeting in [January 2019](#), constitutes a temporary peak in the UNSC's work on climate change. More than 80 states took part in the debate, demonstrating the importance attached to the topic by the international community. But, again, no resolution was adopted. Notably, however, a new name was found: "threat multiplier". It was first introduced in the 2019 debate, by the under-secretary general for political and peacebuilding affairs, and immediately adopted by 15 states and organisations, including the EU and the African Union.

This qualification was meant to build bridges between two camps within the UNSC – on the one side France and the UK calling for actions, (*i.e.* better use of climate-risk data or more financial support for the most at risk) and on the other side China, Russia, and [Trump's US](#). Hence, this disagreement prevented the express use of the

term *threat to peace* to qualify climate change. Diplomats and lawyers elaborated the idea of *threat multiplier*, building on the [qualification used by skilled scientists](#).

One may be tempted to view it as a step backward, or more precisely, as another debate without any tangible impact. One might think, it is yet another (undefined and meaningless) terminology to qualify climate change without concrete consequences.

But, first, it should be noted that the UNSC is not completely silent: it holds more open debates in which members strongly assert their views on the matter and lay down tangible proposals. Second, it allows the UNSC to discuss the issue. Third, while the qualification of a situation as a *threat multiplier* has never been used by the UNSC before, one should not miss the nuances of this terminology. On the one hand, the qualification acknowledges the risks of climate change. Increased migration due to land loss leads, *inter alia*, to a higher food and health insecurity, which overall create an environment more prone for conflict proliferation. On the other hand, it reflects the controversy over whether or not it is a sufficient basis for the UNSC to act. In this sense, the new qualification *is* a step forward. The UNSC has understood its importance and is carefully assessing ways to opening the door to coercive measures. The next step for the UNSC could be to use this terminology as a way to by-pass the need for a Chapter VII resolution to act with regards to climate change. This would pave the way towards a broader understanding of Art. 39 UN Charter by also encompassing *threats multipliers*.

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